

The Formal Dinner

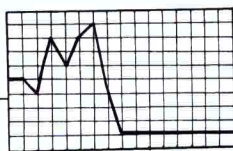
In This Chapter

- The more formal, the more predictable
- Working through the seven courses
- American and continental style; tea and toasting
- The etiquette of the banquet hall and the buffet

You open the invitation to a formal dinner, and the cold fist of dread clutches your heart. You have a vision of stern, important people in formal dress watching you drink from your finger bowl and wash your fingers in the consommé.

If that's your reaction, it is because you don't know what to expect. Formal dinners were not part of your upbringing, and your pals think that a formal dinner is one in which a knife and fork are required. The truth is, you are probably less likely to encounter the unknown at a formal dinner than at any other social gathering. The more formal the dinner, the more predictable it is. And, if you know what to expect, what's coming next, and what to do about it, you can relax and enjoy yourself.

So, let's go through an imaginary formal dinner, step by step. When we finish, you will be able to open a formal dinner invitation with pleasure and attend the event with grace and confidence.



The Bottom Line

At a large dinner party or a banquet table, greet the others before sitting down. If no one introduces you, do it yourself.

Preliminaries

Before approaching the table, make a stop at the restroom. Check your general appearance. Make final hair repairs. Make certain your lipstick will leave no traces anywhere. Then proceed to the table.

- Greet everyone before sitting down. Smile, whether you feel like it or not.
- A server will draw the chair for you. Enter from your left.
- Gentlemen must rise to greet newcomers. They may also rise when ladies leave and return to the table, but that may seem extravagantly courtly these days.

You may remark on how grand the table looks—and it will look grand and, at the same time, daunting. You'll see lots of silver and glass and candles. Don't worry—we'll sort out of that presently.

Napkin Niceties

When you're safely seated, wait for your host to make the first napkin move. When the host places the napkin on his or her lap, the others at the table follow suit. Similarly, at the end of the meal, the host will be the first to place the napkin on the table (to the left of his or her plate) to signal that the meal is over, having first made sure that everyone at the table has finished.



Memo to Myself

It's a good idea to take your cue from the host, beginning with sitting down and putting the napkin on your lap and ending by not putting your napkin back onto the table until the host does so.

Don't flap your napkin to unfold it. In fact, don't unfold the napkin at all if it is one of those large dinner napkins. Leave it unfolded on your lap, with the fold facing inward.

If you leave the table during the meal, place the napkin on your chair. If the server does not push your chair back under the table, you should do so. Be advised that the server may refold your napkin and place it on the arm of your chair. (The uninformed might interpret this small courtesy as a rebuke, incorrectly assuming that napkins always should be left on the chair arm.)

At the end of the meal, do not refold your napkin. Pick it up from its center, and place it loosely on the table to the left of your plate.

All About Wine

Wine will be served during the meal, beginning with the first course, the soup course. If you don't want wine, place your fingertips on the rim of the glass when it is being poured and say, "I'm not having any today (or tonight)." The use of the word "today" indicates that you do not disapprove of wine or those who drink it.

Wine is poured from the right.

White wine and champagne glasses are always held by the stem, so as not to diminish the chill. Red wine glasses also may be held by the stem but generally are held by the bowl because the warmth of the hand releases the bouquet of the wine. The same is true of brandy glasses.

Don't be dazzled by the glasses at your place. The largest is the water goblet. If there is a tall, thin glass, it is the champagne flute. The red wine glass is larger than the white wine glass; if there is a sherry glass, it is the smallest.

If you are not accustomed to drinking alcohol, be careful. Remember that different wines may be served with different courses, and drink sparingly or not at all. Simply decline, as described earlier.

Counting Courses

Take a look at the place setting. The number of courses to be served will generally be indicated by the number of pieces of silverware, although the server may replace silverware between courses at some formal dinners. The general rule is to start from the outside.

You may expect the formal dinner to include seven courses, in this order:

- Soup
- Fish
- Sorbet, or palate cleanser
- A meat or fowl dish
- Salad, often served with cheese
- Dessert
- Coffee

Subtle and Not-So-Subtle Signals

It helps to know which directions things are coming from. Courses are served from the left and removed from the right. Liquids are poured from the right. (Soup, no matter how thin, counts as a food, not a liquid.)